

Ten Characteristics that Distinguish Great Safety Organizations: What Leaders Do to Make Them Real

**Thomas R. Krause, Ph.D.
Chairman of the Board
BST**

After years of studying organizations that have achieved a level of greatness in safety, we have distilled ten characteristics that distinguish them from others. Among these characteristics, great safety organizations have clarity of vision, integrated understanding of the motivations of employees at every level, and engagement of all employees. What do these characteristics tell us about safety functioning in general—and the activities needed to achieve safety greatness in particular?

Fundamentally, the traits of great safety organizations are created by leaders who understand organizational culture and what their particular role in creating it consists of. These leaders focus on exposures rather than injuries, and know their personal relationship to the working interface. These leaders also practice behaviors that turn safety vision into safety practice at every level.

High vs. Low Performers: The role of organizational culture and safety climate

Safety advancement often means instituting fundamental changes in organizational practices, thinking, and even culture. In some organizations, employees respond to these changes readily. In others, the need for change meets ongoing resistance, sometimes to the point of failure. Why some organizations adapt easily and others struggle draws in part on the qualities of the great safety leader. Who the leader is and what leadership practices the leader follows strongly correlate to the safety climate and organizational culture that underpins performance. Understanding the qualities of a “change ready” culture (and how the leader shapes it) is the first step to lasting safety improvement.

There are several culture dimensions critical to high performance in safety, and they can be grouped into team, safety-specific, and organizational dimensions. Of these, the scales belonging to the organizational dimension are the most elemental to setting the stage for change. Employees attitudes toward change depend in part on their perceptions of basic aspects of organizational life, for instance how employees are treated by their supervisor. These variables are also situational and are directly influenced by leadership behavior:

- **Procedural Justice** reflects the extent to which the individual perceives fairness in the supervisor's decision-making process. Leaders enhance perceptions of procedural justice when they make decisions characterized by consistency across persons and time, lack of bias, accuracy (decisions are based on good information and informed opinion), correctability (decisions can be appealed), representativeness (the procedure reflects the concerns, values and outlook of those affected), and ethicality.
- **Leader-Member Exchange** reflects the relationship the employee has with his or her supervisor. In particular, this scale measures the employee's level of confidence that his supervisor will go to bat for him and look out for his interests. Leaders can enhance perceptions of leader-member exchange by developing positive working relationships with their reports and getting each person to see how achieving organizational goals can be fulfilling both to the leader and to the employee.
- **Management Credibility** reflects the perception of the employee that what management says is consistent with what management does. Leader behaviors that influence perceptions of trustworthiness include consistency, integrity (telling the truth, keeping promises), sharing control in decision-making and through delegation, communication, and benevolence (demonstration of concern).
- **Perceived Organizational Support** describes the perception of employees that the organization cares about them, values them, and supports them. The extent to which employees believe the organization is concerned with their needs and interests strongly influences their likelihood that they will "go the extra mile." Leaders can demonstrate organizational support by effecting and communicating efforts that go well beyond what is required.

These factors contribute to an environment that more readily accepts and promotes change. When an employee is treated with dignity and respect and offered support by his or her supervisor, the employee tends to reciprocate: job performance, extra-role behavior, and loyalty tend to increase. On the other hand, the worker who feels demeaned or disrespected is much less likely to engage fully in the work.

Great Safety Organizations: Ten Characteristics

Over the past few years, the author and his colleagues have worked with hundreds of companies to focus on culture and leadership's role in safety performance. Drawing on research of these efforts, and the experience of over 7,000 leaders and 500 leadership teams, we have identified 10 characteristics shared by great safety organizations. These organizations:

1. Understand the real safety objectives of their organization's leadership

Reducing exposure to hazards requires an organizational development undertaking. In order to make solutions a sustainable part of the organization, senior leaders must establish safety as a strategic, rather than tactical, objective. In great safety organizations leaders are aligned on the necessity of safety as an organization-wide strategic objective and core value—and have determined what the alignment means vis-à-vis other strategic objectives. This alignment allows them to develop a clear picture of what they expect the organization to look like once it successfully enacts safety as a strategic priority. In other words, they know what would be

observably different. Leaders that want to create great safety organizations need to ask themselves:

- How strongly committed to safety is our senior-most leader?
- Is alignment around safety as a value high or low among our senior-most leadership team?

2. Understand what motivates safety leaders generally

Leadership motivation for safety takes place in the context of the culture, quality of senior-most leadership, and safety systems of the organization. At the personal level it is intrinsic. The predominant motive driving senior leaders to improve safety is compassion. This is true for safety leaders generally, whatever their place on the organization chart. The leader who works to improve safety is usually doing so out of a deep sense of integrity grounded in ethical principles—a belief that safety is the right thing to do. Compassion and motivation for excellence differ fundamentally from other business motives, including the drive for operating profits and business success. Highly effective leaders also recognize that taking a leadership role in safety gives them an opportunity to create shared values in the organization. When values are shared, they have remarkable effects on organizational citizenship, on the ability of employees to work effectively as teams, and on overall organizational effectiveness.

3. Learn how their organization is de-motivating safety leaders and develop new strategies.

There are many ways in which organizations inadvertently undermine the inherent motivation that leaders have to improve safety. In some cases they can demotivate leaders through how safety is managed, for example by focusing on injuries while ignoring the exposures that lead to them or by making all bonus compensation contingent on injury rates. In other cases, they can demotivate by introducing barriers to effective safety leadership, for instance encouraging leaders to say things they know are contradictory or impossible to achieve. Great safety organizations recognize the realities that leaders face and align organizational systems, processes, and strategy to support consistent safety leadership.

4. Understand the “Safety Perspective” of each level of employee.

As pointed out by Herzberg and others, the most important work-related motivating factors do not have to do with pay, benefits, or other external elements. These things are important, but providing them at best brings the organization to a neutral position. What's more important to driving interest in work performance is achievement, recognition, and the satisfaction of the work itself. Financial and other tangible incentives, while potentially compelling in the short term, do not appeal to the underlying drive for the long term – they do not generate motivation on a personal level.

Intrinsic motivation connects people on multiple levels — the intellectual, the emotional, the creative, and the psychological — with the work they do. This connection is predicated on what each person brings to safety: what safety means to him, what prompts him to become involved in it, and what he would like to get out of it. We begin below with a look at what safety means to the person we are trying to engage; the meanings vary from level to level, just as the experience of safety – and its outcomes – differ at each organizational level. With this understanding, we can define activities and interactions that capitalize on these intrinsic motivations and make them active:

Senior executive

- Fatalities are a primary issue.
- Cost is not usually the issue.
- The strongest motive is broad culture change.

Facility manager

- Fatality exposure is an issue.
- What is important to the people above me?
- How do I motivate the organization for safety excellence?

First-line supervisor

- Looking out for my folks.
- Large variation across employees.
- Lack of confidence regarding safety leadership skill level.
-

Front-line employee

- Safety means my well being, it is personal.
- Interest level is high.
- Frustration with “programs” and inconsistencies.
- Results are visible evidence, not numbers.

5. Get top leadership to develop a vision for safety

Every leader knows that bulleted “vision” lists in the lunchroom do little to alter the climate and create the required culture for safety. Indeed, they often serve to evoke cynicism and ridicule among employees. Instead, great safety organizations develop a *behavioral vision*; that is, their leaders develop specific behavioral narratives that embody safety-promoting conduct from the board room to the working interface. This practical vision answers the question: what observable and replicable behaviors will define the future state of safety? Critically, the safety steering team and the senior leaders then lead by example so that safety initiatives become more than another project to be outlived by employees.

6. Assess safety leadership skill level across the organization.

While leaders vary in their abilities and skills, safety leadership behaviors can be learned and developed. Diagnostic tools allow leaders to see in tangible terms how they are affecting safety outcomes and the wellbeing of the organization. These tools also provide a starting point for individual leaders to develop their own safety best practices and strengthen their leadership style. Specifically, a coach can be invaluable in guiding the individual leader’s development, even for leaders who are already performing at a high level. The goal of coaching is to help leaders understand how their behaviors affect reports, peers, and managers, and to influence their ability to meet personal and organizational goals. Many leaders are pleasantly surprised to find that drastic adjustments to their behaviors are not needed to have assured a measurable impact.

The use of such an approach has been shown to be effective at improving downstream results. The pattern of improvement is common: measurable and significant improvement accompanied by noticeable variations (+ and -) from year to year.

7. Assess the organizational culture and safety climate of the organization.

Culture refers to the unwritten assumptions that influence decision making, attitudes and beliefs, and guides the behavior of those in the culture. In 1999, BST identified nine factors in the research literature that independently correlate to safety performance and which make up the Organizational Culture Diagnostic Instrument (OCDI). Interestingly, only three of the six dimensions are safety specific. These nine factors can be measured and expressed as percentile scores contrasting one organization with many others. Based on the specific profile, the organization can develop interventions that leverage the high functioning areas to improve lower scoring areas.

In a proprietary study published in 2006, BST found that higher culture scores correlated to lower occupational injury rates. The study looked at 94 organizations, representing eight countries and 18 industries, that had used the OCDI and for which we tracked 12 months of occupational injury rate data. The top third of the organizations that scored consistently high across all OCDI scales averaged an occupational injury rate of 4.3 injuries per 100 employees per year, while bottom third averaged 8.5. Clients in the middle third averaged 5.8 occupational injuries per 100 employees per year. The difference between the three groups is statistically significant: (df (94), -.331, p<.01).

8. Teach the core elements of organizational safety to their leaders.

We know that leaders – unavoidably – create organizational culture and climate. They do so by every action, speech, decision, request, promise, and presentation they make, and by every response they give (or fail to give) to the behaviors they observe in the organization. In addition to being definable and observable, the major attributes of organizational culture are measurable in a way that is predictive of safety outcomes (see characteristic #7). The desired culture is also either reinforced or undermined by an organization’s safety enabling and sustaining systems. Great safety organizations assure that their senior leadership knows these elements and the connections among them. Specifically, their leaders are taught:

- Safety enabling systems. These systems and programs assure basic safety functioning. The safety leader needs to know what these systems are, how they are audited, and how effective they are.
- The connection between sustaining systems and enabling systems. Methods of selection and development, performance management, organizational structure, employee engagement, and other management systems support safety enabling systems and assure their effectiveness. Leaders need to understand the relationship between the quality of their fundamental safety systems and what occurs in the working interface where people and technology interact, and where exposures occur.
- How culture influences safety at the working interface. Effective leaders look realistically at culture and identify issues that could undermine safety objectives, such as low trust, poor communication, or inconsistent management credibility.

9. Design interventions that address top leadership, middle managers and front line employees.

Keeping employees safe requires putting into place reliable systems that are operating well and used consistently across the organization. Employees must communicate and collaborate with each other, across departments, between shifts—even when their immediate interests may be in conflict. This level of functioning requires the collaboration and coordination of employees at

every level of the organization. Workers are present at the point of exposure and are critical to safety improvement, but there is a limit in the scope of their impact. Leaders can make decisions about resources and organizational direction, but they are limited in their ability to enact the particulars of work at the front line. Supervisors and middle managers must express the organizational culture and priorities to the workforce while managing and representing that workforce to the larger organization. Great safety organizations address the needs of each of these levels with appropriately designed interventions. When these activities work in concert, front-line employees, middle managers, and senior leaders are respectively enabled to reduce exposure within their everyday roles.

10. Continually re-assess and improve all of the above.

Organizations are not static. Now, perhaps more than ever before, change is a way of life. Objectives, procedures, schedules, equipment, and workers change over time, sometimes rapidly. This means that the people, processes, and challenges present when the sub-processes were implemented may change in months or years, and that periodic review is necessary to assure optimal functioning. Leaders need to be engaged in a renewal process to update each of the processes that make up the safety improvement mechanism.

Conclusion

The characteristics that great safety organizations share are neither mysterious nor are they attainable by only a special few. Each characteristic is actionable, and hence accessible for any organization to acquire. The common underlying thread to these characteristics, and the true key to their success, is the commitment of senior leadership to driving the development of these traits and to creating a truly great safety organization.

Bibliography

Bell, K., O'Connell, M., Reeder, M., and Nigel, R. (April 2008). "Predicting and Improving Safety Performance," *Industrial Management*.

Erickson, J. (May 1997). "The Relationship Between Corporate Culture and Safety Performance," *Professional Safety*, 42: pp: 22-33.

Hofmann, D.A. and Stetzer, A. (1999). The Role of Safety Climate and Communication in Accident Interpretation: Implications for Learning from Negative Events. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84: p. 286-296.

Krause, T.R. (2005). *Leading with Safety*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Krause, T.R. (2008). Motivating Leadership of Safety Excellence: What Really Works. *Proceedings of the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE)*, 2008.